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OFFICE OF VICTIM ADVOCATE

Giving Crime Victims a Voice

Courage • Strength • Resilience

Testimony: Special Committee on Gun Violence Prevention City of Philadelphia | December 14, 2020

Nearly every morning, we wake up to the news of another life – often, multiple lives - lost or impacted by gun violence. Philadelphia currently sits with the highest murder rate it has seen in decades, and the toll it is taking on the community is insurmountable. We must act.

At the Office of the Victim Advocate, we work - day in and day out - to ensure all crime victims and co-victims receive timely post-sentencing rights when their offender receives a state sentence. By law, we facilitate all notifications and services that occur in the back-end of the system (once an offender is apprehended and sentenced). Before coming to OVA, I spent the first ten years of my career on the front end of the system, responding to homicides in the city of Harrisburg. We saw, firsthand, the pain and suffering families experience when that knock on the door comes. As the person doing that knocking far too many times, I also know the vital role that first responders play in ensuring a trauma-informed delivery of services in the aftermath of these tragic and brutal life altering events.

One of my primary goals when I came to OVA was to ensure that the office cultivated a strong connection in Philadelphia. I partnered with former District Attorney Seth Williams to create the first ever OVA satellite office. In its twenty plus year existence, OVA never had a physical presence in the City of Philadelphia; all that changed in 2015 when we hired the first Philadelphia Victim Assistance Coordinator to sit in the DA's office and work with the local victim service staff. Their primary role is to ensure a seamless transfer for victims and families when their cases are sent to the state. In addition, we have spent the past three years in monthly dialogue with the amazing organizations that provide the frontline response to homicides in the city. We have collaborated, advocated for additional funding, and helped streamline the delivery of trauma-informed services to families in the aftermath of homicides.

But regardless of how much planning and coordination we have done, no one could have planned for the onslaught of a pandemic and the highest homicide rate in decades. Philadelphia now has the third highest rate of homicides in 60 years.

While I cannot touch on all the ways in which Philadelphia needs resources and support, I am here today to bring forth two main points that need immediate attention.

First, VOCA (Victims of Crime Act) funding is one of the primary sources of money to allow trauma-informed response to homicides and other crimes. OVA has advocated heavily – at the state level – for an increase in VOCA funding for programs in Philadelphia. VOCA grants are not taxpayer funded; rather, they are paid for out of the Crime Victims Fund, which is comprised of federal criminal monetary penalties that have significantly declined under the Trump administration’s DOJ policies. In Philadelphia, we were able to successfully advocate for tens of millions of dollars in VOCA grants, providing Philadelphia with 32 VOCA funded agencies doing this vital work in the city. This is the most funding - and the most organizations funded - in history. That funding is being threatened right now, and some of the incredible work could come to a screeching halt if Congress does not act soon. Programs at risk include the one in Temple’s trauma unit where each and every single gunshot victim and their families receive immediate trauma informed VOCA services, or the CARES program that ensures every single homicide family in Philadelphia receives trauma informed supportive services within hours of the event. These two programs could be threatened, or ended altogether, depending upon what happens with VOCA funding decisions. In Fiscal Year 2020, the VOCA disbursement, and thus the funding available for victim service providers, decreased by 25% and victim service providers have been told to expect further, potentially catastrophic, cuts. Cuts to these programs that are already struggling to meet the overwhelming need would mean that many of these programs would have to reduce outreach, create waiting lists, or abolish programs, as many VOCA grants in Philadelphia are solely for salaries for these frontline workers. At a time when we are finally recognizing the disproportionate impact on Black lives, we cannot reduce funding or end programs providing targeted outreach. We are asking City Council to join our national efforts in requesting congress to do the following:

- Redirect monetary penalties from federal deferred prosecution and non-prosecution agreements that would otherwise be deposited into the General Treasury into the Crime Victims Fund;
- Increase the federal grant calculation for funding to victim compensation programs from the current 60% to 75% of state-funded payouts; and
- Allow states to request a no-cost extension from the Attorney General, as allowed for other Department of Justice formula grant programs, to ensure states can thoughtfully and effectively distribute victim service grants without being penalized.

This is an urgent matter. We are requesting that this body draft a resolution in support of the 32 VOCA funded agencies urging Congress to ensure VOCA funding is stabilized and does not receive a devastating cut this fiscal year. Any cut to this funding, at a time when the need in Philadelphia is unprecedented, will result in more pain and suffering for families.

Second, in our monthly meetings in Philadelphia, we have discussed the need for additional resources for these agencies to provide families of homicides and gun violence with safe relocation. Relocation is one tool that is being severely underutilized in Philadelphia right now. Victim advocates have vocalized a need to quickly and safely relocate those who are in fear of retaliation. Right now, the state

has two relocation funds: one from the Attorney General's Office that requires DA and law enforcement sign off and full cooperation in all investigations, and a second \$1,000 relocation stipend from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency that is simply not enough to adequately move a person or family to safety. While these resources are helpful, they are not adequately meeting the needs of those impacted. For anyone experiencing significant trauma, personal safety is a primary need. Until that need can be satisfied, it is almost impossible to focus on anything else. To expect full cooperation from the survivors, prior to any trust or guarantee that resources and safety can be met, is a challenge, to say the least. For those who witness shootings and have information that could be vital to solving a case, we need to be able to ensure safety. We are asking that City Council consider two action items pertaining to relocation services. The first is to create a non-lapsing relocation fund that non-profit agencies can apply for emergency relocation assistance. The fund should exceed the PCCD \$1,000 cap, and provide eligibility for those that fall outside the guidelines of the Attorney General's program.

The second is to work with the Philadelphia Housing Authority, who has proven to be an invaluable partner in assisting crime victims with housing, to address the service gap that occurs when individuals are not already on the PHA list. We are asking for a process to be developed and implemented that would allow for victim advocates to apply for priority status for those who are in need of stable and long-term housing, allowing them to bypass the current wait list and to ensure consideration, even when waiting lists are closed. This would allow homicide families to relocate to a long-term housing situation faster and to reduce the cost of temporary safe housing. We believe this will reduce the threat to safety, stabilize families, reduce trauma, and enable a more collaborative working relationship with law enforcement.

Thank you again for holding this hearing, for elevating the needs of crime victims, and allowing OVA to be here today at the table. We stand ready to assist in any way possible to help ensure victims of crime in Philadelphia are served to the best of our ability.

Jennifer Storm, Acting Victim Advocate for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania